

Some sermon follow-up:

In last week's sermon on John 20:19-23, I talked some about how we are "sent" into one another's lives, even as Jesus was sent into the life of Israel (Jn. 20:21). This "sending" into one another within the church builds unity, which in turn is essential to the fulfillment of the church's outward facing mission to the world. I explained how we are obligated to not merely *observe* one another's lives as spectators, but to *get involved* with each other, sharing burdens, struggles, joys, accomplishments, etc. Mission towards outsiders arises out of community with fellow insiders. But to do all that, we need to know one another's stories. To buttress the point, I quoted a church father (paraphrasing): "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." (This quotation has been attributed to numerous sources and shows up in a variety of forms.)

Last week Jenny and I watched a movie that I thought illustrated this last point well: *The Pursuit of Happyness*. The movie is based on a true story. While it has some language and content that make it inappropriate for immature audiences, it is a quite powerful "rags to riches" narrative. Not everyone will like it, but it is certainly worth viewing. It shows the importance of persistence and gives a very un-sentimental look at how difficult life can be in urban America. It also points to the power of mercy (even in small doses) and reminds us that everything we have is a gift.

[Spoiler alert!]

The movie chronicles the hardships of a man named Christopher. C is a hard-working but hard-luck family man in inner city San Francisco trying to make ends meet. He and his wife struggle to make rent and provide for their son, until finally she gives up and splits town. C is left on his own with his son, but perseveres in the face of all kinds of obstacles. Everywhere he goes, it seems C. has to *run* through crowded city streets, with everyone around him getting in his way. (*The pursuit of happiness* proves to be quite difficult!)

Despite having no more than a high school education, C uses his immense, innate talents to secure an (unpaid) internship at a prestigious stock brokerage. It's a risky move -- he has no background in the field and has to give up his (admittedly unproductive) sales job. He is just barely accepted into the program.

At the end of the internship, one intern of many will be chosen to work for the firm. However, even when C seems to be doing everything right, everything around him goes wrong. His hard work seems to be in vain. His employers take advantage of him, "borrowing" his last dollars. He cannot put in as much time as the other interns because he has to pick up his child from daycare. He loses his apartment and has to stand in line with his son to get a bed in a "first-come-first-served" homeless shelter night after night. Appointments with clients fall through. He spends time in jail for unpaid parking tickets. He gets a dreaded letter from the IRS. Etc. The movie does a good capturing just how frustrating life can be. Every time you think things can't get any worse....they do.

The turning point for C is when he makes an unexpected house call at the home of an ultra-wealthy potential investor. The would-be investor does not put any money with C, but on the spur of the moment, graciously invites him to a football game, where C begins to make contacts that *do* bear fruit for the investment business. (Note: One little act of mercy can go a long, long way in someone's life!) Those new found clients are the breakthrough C needed.

Finally, against all odds, C ends up being the intern chosen to go to work for the broker, which opens the door for him to eventually become a multi-million dollar success. When he is called into the office to receive the good news that he got the coveted broker job, one of the firm's leaders asks him, "Was it as easy as it looked?" Obviously, it wasn't! C's life looked rather "normal" to his bosses and fellow interns. But in reality, it was filled with unimaginable challenges every day. Just

finding a place to sleep was an ordeal. Caring for his son was a constant hardship. He had to deal with his failures in marriage and as a salesman. He has to contend with the parking ticket office and the IRS. Etc.

That question -- "*Was it as easy as it looked?*" -- is a question you could ask about anyone's life. No one's life is as easy on the "inside" as it looks on the "outside." That's important for us to remember about each other. *No one* "has it all together." We are all sinners, in need of mercy not only from God but also from one another. Just as Jesus had mercy on his fellow Israelites, so we should imitate him in showering compassion on one another. While we need to encourage one another to godliness and obedience, we also need to "take it easy" on one another at times, not demanding too much and being willing to overlook all kinds of faults and shortcomings. Only love that covers a multitude of sins and bears one another's burdens can make "depth community" possible. Remember: "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

Some more sermon followup:

Obviously the promise made in John 20:23 could use some more explanation than I gave last Sunday. Fundamentally, I think Jesus is promising the Spirit-indwelt church that she will be God's effective agent in applying Christ's redemption to the world. Through the means of grace entrusted to her -- primarily baptism, preaching, absolution, and the Lord's Supper -- she will be the instrument through which people are loosed from their sins so they can enter into the peace of the gospel. (We could also talk about church discipline as a means of binding the unrepentant in their sins, but I'll pass over that for now.)

I think absolution is especially important in this regard. Absolution can be both public and private. It begins with the confession of sin. It is completed with a promise of forgiveness. While all Christians can become mouthpieces of the gospel and declare absolution to one another, pastors are especially set aside within the covenant community to stand *in persona Christi* and declare forgiveness. (This is why most churches that practice absolution as a regular part of worship also vest their minister in either black or white, as a reminder that he is not a "private person," but a designated representative of Christ within the community.)

The Reformers opposed the abuses of the medieval penitential system. They wanted to make sure people understood that only God can forgive sin, and he does so freely, apart from works (e.g., reciting the "Hail Mary" x times to "earn" forgiveness). Priests and pastors must *declare* God's forgiveness in accordance with his word, and not according to their personal whims. Interestingly, the Reformers were not at all opposed to Christians coming to their pastors in private to confess specific sins and receive forgiveness. While Protestant churches usually do not have "confessionals" both Luther and Calvin approved of auricular confession as needed. They saw confession and absolution as an important ingredient in the Christian's assurance of salvation.

Rob Rayburn, a brilliant PCA pastor in Tacoma, WA, has preached a fine sermon on this passage. Here are some excerpts from his comments on John 20:23 (emphasis added):

These, of course, are ministries that are often discussed in the New Testament. The conduct of those who perform these ministries is strictly ordered. Elders in the church, for example, in the exercise of the powers of the keys, must not lord it over the people of God, but must exercise their authority in humility and in love as men who must give an account. It must be a ministry exercised in obedience to Christ and his Word, for he is the only King and Head of his church. And on and on it goes. The Bible is full of instances of men who hold office in the church

but who, because of their infidelity to God and to his Word, have no authority to speak for God, no spiritual power over the hearts and lives of God's people. "I didn't send them and they do not speak for me!" How many times does the Lord say this about the false prophets in Old Testament days! And how many times do we find Paul and other NT writers telling Christians in their churches to ignore the teaching, the warnings, the threats of false teachers who have appeared to trouble the church. My goodness, the Apostle Paul himself was excommunicate; he was cast out of the church for his loyalty to Jesus Christ. But what was retained, in his case, by the elders of the church, had not been retained in heaven. They said he was not forgiven, but God said he was!

No, there is no support for Roman Catholic practice here. What the Lord Jesus is talking about is a ministry of the Holy Spirit through the church and the officers of the church...But, if there is no comfort for Roman Catholics here in John 20:23, *there is no comfort to the ordinary American evangelical mind here either!* There is a real authority conferred here. *The Lord Jesus transmitted a power to declare sins forgiven or retained and he transmitted that power to men we know to have been frail, sinful, and deeply imperfect Christian men. In other words, it is not a merely theoretical authority; it is a real authority given to real men.*

What we have here is an authoritative church. We have the promise of the knowledge on earth of what has been determined in heaven. But what we have in our day in a Christian community and a culture that will not stand for an authoritative church and does not seem to prize the knowledge of what heaven has spoken and done. The typical Protestant evangelical reads this text and sees red. He sees Romanism and he sees authoritarianism. He fears for his privacy and his independence. He fears that his favorite text in all the Bible - Matthew 7:1, "Judge not, lest ye be judged" - will in some way be undermined by this statement of the Lord. He does not want anyone over him with the power to declare him unforgiven! He is an evangelical, to be sure, but he is also very much a democrat and an egalitarian. And so he either hurries on to another text more congenial to his views, or he stays long enough to find an interpretation of the Lord's words more congenial to his views, even if that interpretation usually ends up being something that, on the face of it, seems to be the reverse of what the Lord Jesus actually said!....

As John Calvin put it in his comment on this text in John 20, we learn here that the forgiveness of sins that is committed to Christian pastors and elders is not to be sought far off! It is right here; it can be known; it can be declared by men. This treasure of forgiveness is, Calvin admits, exhibited in earthen vessels, but not only does that remind us that the forgiveness itself comes from God and not from men - but brings it near to us, in voices that we can hear. *To a person who knows God holy and himself a guilty sinner, there is nothing greater in all the world than to know himself or herself forgiven! Christ is here speaking of the authoritative declaration of that wonderful news....*

Christ was good and wise to transmit to his church the authority to speak on his behalf concerning this most important of all matters, whether men and women are at peace with God....

John Donne has beautifully expressed what should be the hope, the expectation, and the intention of every faithful preacher of God's Word, every faithful Christian elder, and every faithful Christian, both for himself or herself, and for the entire ministry of the Christian church.

"It is not God's ordinary way to be whispering of secrets. For publication of Himself he hath constituted a Church. And in this church, his ordinance is ordinance indeed; his ordinance of preaching batters the soule, and by that breach, the Spirit enters; his Ministers are an earthquake, and shake an earthly soule; they are the sonnes of thunder, and scatter a cloudy conscience." [Cited in J.S. Stewart, Heralds of God, New York, 1946, p. 211.]

A faithful Christian should be so glad that there are men on earth who can tell him or her that his sins or her sins are forgiven. There is nothing in the world more important to know than that - nothing nearly so important to know as that! There is no one in this world who can tell you beforehand that you will live a long life. No one can tell you if you will be wealthy and prosperous. But there are men, many men, ordinary men, who can tell you if your sins are forgiven and if you will go to heaven when you die. Is that not what you want to know? What you must know? The Lord Christ thought so.

You can get more info by looking the text box in the bulletin underneath the declaration of absolution. It includes a few very helpful quotations from Calvin.